



## **What is Buddhist Meditation?** **by** **Kyabgon Traleg Rinpoche**

Even though I live in Australia, when I go overseas, normally I go to Europe and America. I have not had the opportunity to come here (New Zealand) very often, but I am extremely happy to be here this time. It is a very beautiful country and I am very happy to be given the opportunity to meet with you and to share with you some of my ideas on Buddhist teachings and more specifically, this evening, on Buddhist meditation.

Quite possibly some of you are completely new to Buddhism so I will explain what Buddhist meditation is in a more general way, rather than talking about its specifics. There are many different ways to do Buddhist meditation and there are many different kinds of Buddhist meditation, but I think what we need to understand first and foremost is why it is so important for Buddhists to emphasize meditation.

If you go to a Buddhist centre, you will find they offer courses on meditation and meditation classes, but there is less emphasis on the other aspects of religious activities that you might find if you went to a synagogue, church or even Hindu temple for instance. If you go to a Buddhist centre, you will find that meditation is emphasized and seen as the most important practice. Why is this the case? Why meditation rather than doing good work, doing charity? Why meditation rather than praying to God or doing other forms of ritual practices, following a particular diet or emphasising rules and regulations? For example, how we should conduct ourselves, when we should go to bed, how many times we should bathe, what we should eat, what we should not eat, how the food should be prepared. All of these things are very important for a number of people, and I am not saying that Buddhism does not have views about these things. Buddhism values vegetarianism for instance. Even though not many Buddhists are vegetarians, particularly Tibetan Buddhists, vegetarianism is encouraged. Still, doing any of these things is not the most important thing. What is the most important thing for Buddhists to do as a practice? Meditation.

Now, when we say meditation it can mean many things, so we have to understand what we mean by meditation. In Buddhism meditation does not mean reflection – self reflection for instance – or meditating on problems. We can use meditation in so many of these different contexts, but in Buddhism when we talk about meditation it has to have certain elements of concentration, mental equilibrium, awareness and a sense of being in the present. These are the kinds of things that are emphasized.

When we say meditation in Buddhism we mean we have to learn to concentrate our mind. We have to learn to focus our mind. We have to learn to settle the

mind. But why do we need to do that? Why do we need to settle the mind? Why do we need to concentrate? Because in Buddhism we ask where are we? Where are we as human beings? What is our present condition like? Our present condition is one of confusion. We do not have a full, clear idea about where we are and what we are experiencing. We think we are fully conscious, for instance, we think we are conscious agents who make deliberate choices, deliberate decisions about life. We think we are conscious agents that make specific decisions and determinations. According to Buddhism, this is mistaken. We are not fully conscious; we are not in charge of our lives. We are not in a position to decide fully about life in a sensible and meaningful way because we are in confusion. We do not know what is good for us. We do not know what is bad for us. Even when we think we are doing things to help ourselves, even when we think we are doing things to improve our lives, we end up doing the opposite.

Why does this happen, why is this occurring? It is occurring because of what we call "ignorance" in Buddhism – this basic confusion that we have. The confusion that we speak about is not some kind of metaphysical state; it is the confusion we experience on a daily basis. It is why we get caught up in all kinds of disturbing mental states. It is how we harbour and nurture conflicting emotions of all kinds – excessive desire, greed, anger, resentment, bitterness, jealousy. Because these kinds of strong emotions arise in us, we are unable to act with full sensibility. We are not with it. We are not functioning with our mind fully in tact. We are thrown into a deep state of confusion and end up doing things that are not only harmful to others but – more importantly – to ourselves. We get into the habit of doing these things. We think millions of things every day – every minute even – so many thoughts are going through our mind. Now, how many of these thoughts are we aware of? How many times during the day, at night, even while sleeping, do we get caught up in all kinds of negative mental states and negative emotions? So many times. Yet we hardly pay any attention to that whatsoever. We fail to see the corrosive effect these mental states have on ourselves.

So then what happens is these negative states start fairly mildly and intermittently, but if we are not careful they become deep seated. They become part of ourselves, part of who we are, what we are, how we conduct ourselves, how we respond to things, how we inter-act with other human beings, how we relate to the world. All of these activities are coloured by our misconceptions or misperceptions. They are generated and encouraged by what we call a deluded mind. A deluded mind that is filled with anger, with resentment, and which then gives rise to what we call unwholesome destructive behaviours and so on. If we understand that, then we can understand why meditation would be a useful practice to do.

It is not enough to say, "Oh you should not get angry." It is not enough to say, "Oh, I should not behave in this self-destructive fashion." It is very difficult for us not to do things. First of all it is very difficult for us to even recognize that we are entertaining certain negative mental states, that we are harbouring certain unwholesome thoughts and emotions. Even if we are actually fortunate enough to have some kind of idea about it, even if we think, "this is going on," even then we feel helpless. We find it very hard to stop. It is like smoking, you smoke and then

you want to stop and you think, "Oh this is not good. Smoking is a really filthy habit." But, it is very difficult. It is "easier said than done," as we say. How much more difficult would it be for us to try to overcome a habit which we have been inculcating ever since we were born? Perhaps even – if you believe in rebirth – for many, many lifetimes. Trying to overcome a habit that we have been accumulating over a long period of time would be very difficult.

Therefore, we need some kind of method. We have to have a method to do something about it, to deal with our mental habit. If we can deal with our mental habit, our physical habit will be dealt with. This is the Buddhist idea. We can try to modify our physical behaviour till we are blue in the face – whatever that means – until the cows come home – I don't know what that means either! English being my second language, I don't have to understand it I suppose. I will leave it up to you to work out the meaning of these expressions. But it is very difficult. Trying to get rid of physical habits is secondary to getting rid of mental habits. If we deal with our mind then we don't have to worry about our body. Of course we have to give consideration to how we behave on a physical level – what we are doing with our body. If we deal with our thoughts, though, if we deal with our emotions, and if we become more familiar with our own mind, if we see how the mind operates – functions – then we will be able to deal with our mental habits. If we deal with our mental habits then our physical habits will be modified in time, in keeping with the change in the mind.

This is why meditation is so important. If we do meditation then we have this opportunity. If we do not do meditation then how can we really change? Apart from praying to God, saying "God, please give me strength so that I can stop myself from acting violently," or, "Please God, help me stop myself from doing this or that shameful thing, this thing that I am embarrassed about, or feel guilty about." We could also go and see a therapist but there aren't that many options and all these other options are not about taking charge of our own life. Basically, meditation has to be seen as something we are doing to take our life into our own hands. We are doing something for ourselves, by ourselves – this is the key point. When we meditate, if we get any benefit from it, then it is due to our own doing; it is not because of our therapist, it is not because of our guru, it is not because of some benevolent divine intervention that has helped us. We have helped ourselves and this is the key point. This is why, in Buddhism, we put emphasis on meditation; it allows us to change, to really fully be ourselves. Normally, as I mentioned before, we are not fully ourselves. We are victims of our own overwhelming emotions, our own negative habits.

Often in religious and spiritual traditions, there is a lot of emphasis on not doing certain things, and doing other things. In Buddhism, we also have this. All religious traditions emphasize becoming more loving and more compassionate but to become loving, considerate and so forth, we have to have these thoughts in ourselves. When we do meditation, we can develop those qualities. We can learn how to reduce thoughts and emotions that interfere with our lives in a very disruptive fashion, that have a very negative impact on our lives. We also have the opportunity to inculcate positive emotions, positive mental attitudes. These

will then allow us to flourish, grow and mature because all these negative thoughts and emotions are holding us back.

According to Buddhism we have the potential to be much more advanced beings. In the Buddhist tradition we, as humans, have an enormous capacity – a capacity to go in both directions. It is said living a human life is like being some bug caught in a bamboo stem – you can go either up or down. As human beings we can rise up or we can descend into the depth of depravity. People get shocked by the things other human beings have done – like Pol Pot or Hitler and so on – but on the other hand other human beings have been able to achieve great heights of nobility, saintliness and sainthood. This is what, as Buddhists, we try to understand. We try to realise we can go downhill, really descend into living hell – the hell realm does not have to be something we experience after we die, we can experience hell in this life, as many of us know. We can descend into a hell created by our own mind, or we can attain great heights of spiritual beatitude, fulfilment and realizations. These states are reachable. They are not beyond us. As human beings we have the responsibility to try to reach those heights because if we can descend that low, then equally we can ascend just as high.

What happens, according to Buddhism, is determined by whether we can exercise control over our own mind. When we say, “exercise control over our own mind” we are not talking about being a control freak, but “controlling” in the sense of being aware. “Self-awareness” is to be distinguished from self-consciousness. Sometimes I think people mistake self-awareness for self-consciousness. If we feel self-conscious, that is a bad thing. Then we think everybody is looking at us, or everybody is judging us. Like the way I am feeling right now! I am being judged. This is exam time for me in this great city of Auckland!

I think that sometimes people who meditate also become self-conscious. When meditating you are left there with your own thoughts, your own paranoia, your own anxieties, your own anger, your own fear of a multitude of things. You may become more self-conscious, more exposed or something. Then, after doing meditation, you go out in the street and think, “Oh, everybody can now see all my nasty bits.” That is not what we are trying to do. We are trying to learn to be self-aware. To be self-aware is to know what is going on in our own mind. If we can do that, then we will have a greater sense of being in charge of our own lives. Everything that we do will become doable because, according to Buddhism, most of the impediments and obstacles that we face in life are not obstacles that others – other people or the environment – present to us. The real obstacles are the handicaps we suffer from because of our own distorted way of thinking. In Buddhism they are called veils; we talk about the veils of conflicting emotions and the veils of conceptual confusions. It is like we are wearing veils, even without being part of the Taliban or whatever. I thought I would throw that in. We are wearing veils, and until those veils lift, we are going to be trapped in ourselves – in our own prison. Meditation helps us to clear that up, to lift those veils.

In meditation then, what is emphasised is learning how to be in the present – how to be in the present is the key. Often, I think, people misunderstand what is meant by “being in the present.” It is said when we meditate we should not be in

the past and we should not be in the future, we should be in the present. The past is not worth dwelling on – it is gone. The future is not worth thinking about because it has not yet occurred. All the worries and anxieties we experience now, about things that have not yet happened are fruitless exercises and also very painful and destructive. Generally to calm the mind in Buddhism we sit on our meditation cushion and then try to focus our mind on our breath; breath coming in, going out, coming in, going out. If any thought or emotion arises, it is said we should just take note of them and let them go.

Often people have said to me, when they meditate, it is not possible to be in the present because there are always thoughts occurring and as soon as a thought occurs they are either in the past or in the future. How can they be in the present? This is a problem many people experience and I think it really comes from misunderstanding what is meant by being in the present. Being in the present does not mean our thoughts should not be about the past or the future, what it does mean is that we should not follow the thoughts about the past or the future – there is a big difference. When we have thoughts, most of them are going to be about the past or the future because this is what thoughts are. Our thoughts are about our experiences or the experiences we may not have yet had, it is not possible to prevent thoughts from arising at all while we are meditating. “Not dwelling in the past” and “not anticipating the future” does not mean we should not think about the past or the future. When those thoughts about the past or the future occur, we should just leave it at that. We should not elaborate on them. This is the basic point of being in the present – even if we have thoughts, if we are present, then we are in meditation. There is also some kind of benefit in noticing the thoughts.

Meditation should not be used simply to calm the mind, to go into a deep state of relaxation. People do this kind of meditation and in Buddhism we have techniques for this kind of meditation, but calmness without insight, is not very useful. It will not be transformative in other words, because we do not see anything. If we are just calm – if our mind is calm – and we are meditating, we may have a sense of being at peace with one self and everything, there may be nothing that is particularly disturbing. But in that state we have not seen anything, we have gained no real insight and if we have not gained any insight then it cannot be transformative. All that it will do is give us some kind of relief. It is like taking time out, you take time out, relax and then you go back into what we call the “samsaric fray.”

Then you go through the turbulence of being in what we call samsaric turbulence. Samsara means the world that we are living in now, it means “cyclic existence.” We are always going in cycles and in circles to, I am sure: round and round and round because we are habit driven. Without any clear idea about where we are going, what we are doing, we are just moving around in a circle making the same mistakes over and over. We are doing the same things over and over, and never learning anything new, not gaining insight into anything, so therefore there is no liberation. Doing meditation to calm the mind and to have a sense of respite from samsaric turbulences means we just feel a bit better for a while, but nothing really changes. When we arise from our meditation we still yell at our kids, and

we still act in a most obnoxious fashion with other people – we lose our temper or whatever. Then we feel guilty, then we feel sorry for ourselves and by feeling sorry for ourselves we get even more angry, then we shout some more – we go round and round in that circle.

Meditation has to be used in such a way that we not only gain calmness from meditation but there is also insight. In Buddhism we meditate in such a way that we can have both. First, we have to learn to calm the mind. We do this by just observing, by learning the power of observation and trying to improve on it. Noticing things is very important you know - it is the key to meditation and life generally I think. If we are observant then all kinds of opportunities present themselves, we see a lot of options that are available to us because we have used the power of observation. If we are not observant then we miss so many things, they go unnoticed and as a result many opportunities are lost. To have a successful meditation we need to be observant and that is why we practice mindfulness. This is why we use the breath and so forth, to anchor the mind, to learn to concentrate.

When we concentrate, though, we should not concentrate too intensely. If we concentrate too intensely the mind becomes too tight. There has to be a sense of relaxation. The mind can be put into a more relaxed mode without being too relaxed. Buddha himself, in one of the sutras, mentioned that the way to meditate is like tuning a violin string. If it is too tight, the tension is too great and the string will break. If the string is too loose then it will not produce the desired musical sound that you want. Similarly, when we are meditating if we are concentrating too intensely on the breath or even a physical object then our meditation is too tight.

We can focus our mind on a physical object visually or rest our attention on a sound but the breath is generally emphasized in Buddhism and there is a reason for this. I will not go into it in depth but briefly, breath is important because in Buddhism we believe breath is the mediator between the mind and the body. If we learn to focus on the breath and use this focus, we not only succeed in stabilizing the mind but also the body itself is put in a more receptive, more congenial mode. When there is agitation in the mind our breathing pattern changes, what is going through our head is reflected in our breath. In certain Buddhist literatures it is said the mind is like the rider and breath is like the mount, like a horse, they go together, they operate in unison. Therefore there is a lot of merit in using the breath to anchor ones attention rather than a visual or audio object but if you prefer you can use music or some physical object placed in front of you, a statue or anything. It is said that even a pebble or piece of stick that one can focus one's mind on will do.

So, after relaxing we should then try to gain insight into our own mind, we should learn the habits of the mind. If we learn how the mind operates, we gain power over the mind. Then we no longer see the mind as something that we have, as something with limbs, or something that we possess. Rather, mind is what we are, we are what we think. We are our attitudes, beliefs and memories, the experience of all of these things. The sum total of all of this constitutes who, or what, we

become. By becoming familiar with ourselves, we can genuinely look at self-transformation and when self-transformation occurs, according to Buddhism, it can be liberating. In Buddhism it is said that through meditation we can unlock the richness of the mind. That mind itself has an untapped reservoir of treasures that we are not using. In Buddhism we say we are only operating on one level at the moment, but we can operate on another level. We can think in a totally different fashion. We can use our mind in a totally different way, so that what we experience becomes liberating and enlightening.

Although these days the word enlightenment is used very freely, in Buddhism it is the central concept. "Becoming enlightened" means our delusions are decreasing and this occurs due to meditation. What is "enlightening" is that we begin to see how things are working, what is going on. We begin to understand what is really happening. What is *really* happening, not what we think is happening. As I said before, according to Buddhism at the moment even our perceptions of physical objects, houses, trees, buildings, boats, cars, are all distorted. We have a distorted perception so everything we experience is part of the deluded mind. Nothing we see is really clear to us. With meditation, with the lifting of the veils, things will become clearer. Things will become more enlightened which will then make us feel freer. This kind of freedom we experience is true liberation, as opposed to being liberated from external constraints. Having the freedom to do what we want, or having the freedom to act in such and such a fashion, although they are important, are not true freedom according to Buddhism. True freedom comes when we are able to free ourselves from the constraints that we ourselves have put on ourselves. We are stopping ourselves from being better human beings and we can be better human beings, we can actually become more enlightened.

Becoming more enlightened is not a lofty goal in many ways, it is achievable, it is within reach. Of course becoming a fully enlightened being maybe difficult, but to be more enlightened than we already are is not so difficult. When we are meditating if we become more observant first, more mindful, then we take more things in and we begin to see things more clearly, that will then increase our sense of awareness and our wisdom, as we say in Buddhism. In this way meditation leads to a real sense of freedom – true liberation and a true state of enlightenment – because we understand things. We understand ourselves, we understand our relationship to reality and our views, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes are not coming from a confused, deluded mental state. We have understanding and insight, with more wisdom.

I think I have said all I wanted to say about meditation. As you can see, or at least I hope you can see, in Buddhism meditation is emphasized because meditation is the key to self-realization. Without meditation it is not possible to achieve liberation or salvation because the real hindrance to reaching our true human potential, to become a fully human being, lies within – it is our own ignorance and our own deluded states of mind. If we can rise above them then we will be living a much richer life, a life that is not only beneficial to ourselves but to others as well. According to Buddhism our capacity to benefit others increases in proportion to our own self transformation. Often we want to do really

good work, we want to do things to help other people and we have good will. We mean well. We want to do the right things. But even when we try to do something good it is very difficult to make it totally free of all kinds of impurities – thoughts, emotions. It is difficult to stop it being diluted by our own selfish needs and desires.

I think many people have this conception that Buddhism is always knocking human experience and human goodness. People have a very negative image of Buddhism because it teaches that life is suffering, that there is no self, and that nirvana is extinction, but it is actually very positive. Buddhism has a very positive message if you understand it, if you look into it properly. Buddhism, far from teaching a philosophy of self-neglect – as many people think it does – on the contrary says as human beings we only need to rely on our own resources, our own wits, our own abilities, in order to reach our true potential, to reach our true self hood. Buddhism values reaching that ultimate pinnacle of human excellence, as exemplified by Buddha Shakyamuni in Bodhgaya. We, as Buddhists, follow Buddha Shakyamuni because he was so amazing, and so wonderful and he achieved a level of human excellence, a pinnacle of human attainment, that very few have achieved. He really made it. His life demonstrated to everyone that this is something that we can all aspire to. In this way it is very clear that Buddhism is about self nurturing, but self-nurturing in the true sense of the word – being able to look after ourselves in such a way that it leads to our fulfilment, not our downfall.

If we are following our own temporary, very shortsighted selfishness, greed and egotism then whatever it is we are trying to get, whatever reward we want, it is very limited and its cost is far greater. We do this at our own peril. If we want to do something beneficial for ourselves, then we should start with meditation. I think we will stop there, thank you very much. Thank you for – what is the expression – lending your ears. If you want to ask some questions or if you want to make comments you are welcome. You know I just wanted to present my own perspective, I am not here to convert you or something like that. I mean if you have another idea you want to share then you can do so as well. Thank you.

## Questions

**Question:** It seems for myself that meditation is really, really hard. If it is hard and it is very difficult to transform your mind, is it a bad thing to continue anyway or to give it up and try latter in the day or another day? What is your advice?

**Rinpoche:** I think if you are starting meditation you should start with short sessions. You should not try to sit for a long time thinking that the longer you meditate the better you will be. It is the same as with physical exercise – you can overtrain even if you are training your body. So similarly, just because you want to meditate and you want to progress with your meditation, you should not push yourself too hard. You should start with shorter sessions and if possible try to sit more than once a day – short sessions, but frequently, even during the day. If you are working, during your lunch break or something like that. If you buy some lunch go to the park and sit on the park bench. If you try to practice a bit of

mindfulness and awareness even if it means just observing, simply observing, doing things like that is really the key.

The other thing is when meditating, when we have negative thoughts, when negative emotions and things like that come up we should not feel alarmed. We should not think, "Oh this is bad. I have these negative thoughts and emotions arising so my meditation is ruined. It is being ruined." We should not think like this. If you stop meditating because you have negative thoughts and negative emotions arising during meditation, how does that help? Those negative thoughts and negative emotions are there anyway. So you have to see it from the positive point of view and say that now you are noticing. As I was saying before, we have millions of thoughts a day but how many of these thoughts do we become aware of? This means even noticing negative thoughts and notions arising in meditation is part of meditation. It is part of meditation because you are noticing – that is the key.

You may be meditating and negative thoughts and emotions arise but you do not notice them, that is worse. It is like somebody has stolen your purse right out from under your nose! You feel cheated. You were sitting there meditating and then you got carried away, you got distracted, and when you come back to your senses you think it is too late, but it is never too late. Not to notice is not to be in meditation, to notice is meditation. To make it easier for ourselves we have to start thinking like this. In Buddhism it always comes back to our attitude – how we view meditation, how we relate to it and what sort of expectations we have of it. All of these things color our experience. Our meditation will be difficult or not difficult depending on how we relate to meditation practice. This always has to be kept in mind, otherwise we will think meditation is too hard. It is our responses – how we evaluate and interpret what we are experiencing – that really determines whether something is hard or easy. We know this to be true in everyday life as well. The same thing can be hard or difficult depending on the many things that are going on in our head at any given time, meditation is just like everything else.

The other thing is if you have what you might interpret or understand as a negative experience during meditation, then you should not expect that the next time. You have to have some kind of freshness in terms of meditation; just because you had a certain kind of experience in meditation last time does not mean in the next meditation session you will experience the same sort of things, the same difficulties, the same problems. I think that is very important because our mind has a tendency to do this and it causes a lot of unnecessary problems. It is like we have had some kind of neck pain or something like that, then you may wake up one morning and the pain is not there – you think the pain is gone – but then you look for it and the pain has come back. It happens. If we expect something to go wrong, to be unpleasant or difficult it is more likely to be.

As Buddhists, we believe in impermanence. We believe nothing remains the same. Just because something happened yesterday doesn't mean we have to wait for the same thing to happen tomorrow. This notion of impermanence is a very important concept in Buddhism. It has also been appropriated in the sort of

negative sense that nothing remains the same so what is the point in doing anything? It is not going to last anyway. But just because nothing remains the same does not mean things do not accumulate. Our negative habits prove that nothing remains the same, they get worse! I am sorry but we have to think that just because things have been a particular way in the past does not mean they will be like that in the future. We should try to remember that being more observant, more aware, is more important than whether we have really pleasant thoughts, wholesome thoughts, virtuous thoughts or harmful thoughts, jealous thoughts and angry thoughts in meditation. I think you know what I mean when we think things like, "I am trying to meditate and these really disturbing thoughts are arising in my mind, so now my meditation has been disrupted," or something like that, when it has not really been disrupted as long as we notice.

**Question:** How about inspiring dharma thoughts? Are we trying not to have expectations, or no thoughts?

**Rinpoche:** Having "no thoughts" is not really the point. The point, in Buddhism- what we emphasize - is what is called "letting go." Not having any thoughts is really difficult and there is no real value in it. You have "no thoughts," so what? I am not saying that particularly in relation to you, I am just saying that in all Buddhist traditions going into a state of complete mental blankness is discouraged. This is true in Zen Buddhism, in Theravada tradition, and it is also true in Tibetan Buddhism. What we really have to try to do is practice what is called "letting go." "Letting go" means that when a thought arises we notice it and we leave it at that. We don't elaborate on it, comment on it, or anything like that. For example, if a negative thought has arisen, we don't say, "Oh! It is negative. It is not good. I am meditating, why am I having this negative thought." All these kind of thoughts are distracting when we elaborate on them, so when a thought arises, we notice it and then we let go. This is the key.

According to Buddhism, in the future, if we keep on practicing it will also have a transformative impact in our lives. How many times do we find certain things hard to forget or let go? Particularly if it is very upsetting, annoying, irritating or hurtful, we cannot. When we are walking in the street, it is happening in our head. When we are eating, it is going on. When we are sleeping, we even dream dreams about these things. In Buddhism we say that there is real wisdom in paying attention to little things. We usually think that making a change in life has to be something dramatic, something really drastic, but according to Buddhist teachings we have to pay attention to the little things. If those things are dealt with, then big things will be taken care of. For instance, learning to let go of a mildly negative thought repeatedly - over and over. Meditation has to develop into a habit. Meditative way of thinking and doing also have to become a habit, as a counter measure to our old habits. To overcome our old habits we have to develop new habits that will aid us.

Learning to let go of little things will impact how we let go of the things we worry about, our resentment about upsetting things and so on. Even if you meditate you will still get upset, but you may be able to let go of it a little more easily than if you were not meditating. These are not small changes, if we can do this they bring big changes in our lives. Our life will be less anguish ridden - less pain

ridden. As I was saying before, being preoccupied with these things takes us away from living our life. Whenever we are preoccupied with these voices in our head we are not fully engaged with whatever it is that we are doing, so we are not living. When we are spending time with our friends, trying to have a good time, we are not really having a good time. At least the person who is otherwise occupied in the head is not fully there, and therefore not having a good time. If you are at work, trying to study – trying to do anything in life – you can't be as present as you would be were it not for being constantly pulled away by other thoughts.

In this way, the things that inhabit us are more distracting than friends who say, "Come on lets go out. Let's go to the beach. Let's just lie in the sun. Why meditate?" Outside distractions – movie theatres, bars and so on – are less distracting than that mind following the distractions in our own head, that is constantly following this, that and the other thing. You may be just sitting on the couch all by yourself at home, but even then you may be completely occupied. It has a debilitating effect, after a while it wears you down. You feel completely exhausted – worn out – because you are being banged around so much in the head.

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